

The Twenty-seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 5:1-7
<i>Response</i>	For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 80:9, 12, 13-14, 15-16, 19-20
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 4:6-9
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 21:33-43

On the twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year A, the Church skips down to the fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians. And here it gives some of his final words of exhortation and encouragement to the Church at Philippi in chapter 4, verses 6-9. So let's just read through these briefly, and we'll try to back up and say a little bit about them. In chapter 4, verse 6, Paul says these challenging words:

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you.¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

So if you recall, I talked about the fact that Paul is concerned about the Church at Philippi. He's writing from his imprisonment, likely in Rome, sending this letter to them to encourage them. And one of the things he's trying to teach them is to be at peace, no matter what the circumstances they may find themselves in. And in this passage, he's really emphasizing something that I think is very important and relevant for our own day and also for early Christians, especially in the context of persecution and tribulation that they went through: namely, freedom from anxiety. Freedom from anxiety—that's really the theme of the reading for today.

And the first thing I would say about this is that...number one, when Paul tells the Church at Philippi to have no anxiety about anything, that might seem like a grandiose claim or rather an extravagant demand that he's making. But in fact, although he doesn't quote Jesus here, he's simply echoing the teaching of Christ. He's getting this teaching directly from the Sermon on the Mount.

So if you go back to the Sermon on the Mount—and I don't mean he's quoting the Sermon on the Mount, I'm just saying it's the same content. So in Matthew 6—I don't know about you, but this is one of my favorite teachings of Jesus but also one of the most difficult to put into practice...is Jesus' famous teaching on anxiety in Matthew 6:25-34. And in it, you recall He says:

“...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

And then in verse 34, He says:

“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day.

Now in the Greek there, the word for “anxiety”—it’s very similar to the stem, the root of the word for remembering something. *Merimnaō* is the Greek word. And so when we’re anxious about things, what we tend to do is think about them, remember them, ponder them, worry over them. And Jesus here, when He speaks this word “do not be anxious,” it’s in the form of a command. It’s not just a suggestion. He’s commanding His disciples not to have anxiety about anything.

And so Paul does the same thing here in the letter to the Philippians. He says it as an imperative, a command:

Have no anxiety about anything... (Philippians 4:6a)

And I don’t know about you, but my response to that is: Well, that’s great. I appreciate the advice...but how do I do that? What is the secret to freedom from anxiety?

And thankfully, Paul, in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit here, gives us not just the command but he also gives us the method. He gives us the practical explanation of how to do that. So if you just look at the next line, he says:

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.
(Philippians 4:6)

Ah, so there it is. So what is the secret to freedom from anxiety? How can we practically practice...How does he expect the Philippians to practice being free from anxiety when they’re facing difficult circumstances? Two things. Pray—

number one, prayer. And then thanksgiving, number two. And this is very important.

I think many of us would recognize that prayer is important. But we tend to forget the second part, which is to pray to God, not just with supplication—asking I need this, I need that, I need this, I need that, petitions, that’s that kind of prayer—but with the prayer of thanksgiving...in other words, gratitude. Gratitude.

And the Greek word there for “thanksgiving”—surprise, surprise—is *eucharistia*, which means thanksgiving. It’s also the word that’s going to eventually become the term of choice to describe the Lord’s Supper, the Christian Eucharist, the Christian thanksgiving. Thanksgiving for what? Thanksgiving for the incarnation, thanksgiving for the redemption, for the passion, death, and the resurrection of Christ...and all of the eternal rewards that were won by Christ.

So how does that help with freedom from anxiety? Well, one of the things Paul recognizes here is that if the Philippians can not only ask God for good things—he says “make your requests,” he’s not saying don’t ask God for good things—but if they can couple those requests for good things with thanksgiving to God, gratitude to God no matter what circumstances they find themselves in, they’re going to cultivate a freedom from anxiety. Because when you’re thankful to God no matter what happens, it gradually gives you the strength, the grace to detach—or should I say, to arrive at a place where your happiness, your peace, isn’t contingent on circumstances. Because as long as the peace that you possess is contingent on everything going well around you, you will never have any peace. Because in this world, everything’s not always going to go well; it’s just not going to happen.

And Paul recognizes that. I mean, he’s in prison, and he’s writing this. He’s not in prison because he’s not holy. He *was* holy. He’s not in prison because he’s not doing God’s will. He *is* doing God’s will. But he’s suffering precisely because that is what God has called him to. Nevertheless, he has peace. And it’s not a natural peace that he’s talking about here. He’s talking about a supernatural peace that’s a gift of grace. That’s why he says:

...the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

So when the peoples' intellect and will—their hearts and their minds—are rooted in Christ, and they can give thanks no matter what happens, then they will have found the secret to a peace that passes understanding....the secret to freedom from anxiety.

Because let's face it, a large part of our anxiety in this life is about...actually flows from our desire to control what happens. And as you get older, you realize you don't really have any control. And so if peace is contingent on being in control, and then you realize you're not in control, then you're going to be plagued with anxiety.

But what Paul is saying here to the Philippians is, “Look, the peace of God that surpasses all understanding is going to keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” In other words, this is a gift of grace. This isn't just something you can do by trying really, really hard. It's not the result of mere human effort. It is a gift of supernatural grace that Paul is leading the Philippians to enter into—something to receive.

And then he gives them a second point. Well, listen:

...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

So what did Paul just do? He gave a list of virtues—truth, honor, justice, purity, loveliness, graciousness, excellence, things that are worthy of praise. And he says, if you want to have the peace that passes understanding, focus your mind on those things. Think about *those* things.

Now, how does that relate to what he just said? Well, contrast this with anxiety. If anxiety—*merimnaō* in Greek—is our tendency to think about all of the things that make us afraid or angry or sad or grief...grieving. If anxiety is rooted in constantly

remembering and fretting about those things, then freedom from anxiety and peace (the opposite), is going to be rooted in thinking about the good things, thinking about the virtues, thinking about the gifts that God has given...and being grateful for the good.

So at the risk of reducing this profound Pauline insight into a platitude that everyone knows, it's the old saying to "count your blessings." Counting your blessings on a regular basis at the end of each day, giving thanks to God for the good things that He's given you—and even more, you can go further than that and give thanks to God even for the difficulties and the trials and the sufferings, but start with the good things, at least—is a very practical way to practice the freedom from anxiety that Paul is calling the Philippians to here in Philippians 4.

And let's face it...I don't know about you, but one of the temptations that we have, especially in modernity, where there's a constant influx of information—whether it's through social media or the news or the Internet or the television—we basically, on a daily basis, are inundated with a tsunami of bad news, of bad things, of vices, of ugliness, of lies, of impurity, of things that are not excellent but degraded...all these things are the opposite of this list of virtues that Paul is calling people to think about.

And so is it surprising that we have an epidemic of anxiety and depression and all kinds of other things that plague contemporary society? Our minds weren't made to constantly think about evil and evil things and vices and ugliness and impurity and all those aspects that are so constantly placed before us. And it's not just us. This is in the first century, so the more things change, the more they stay the same.

But Paul here is giving a practical principle that is perennial. Namely, we need to take time to think about the good things, to think about virtues, to meditate (in other words) on the good gifts of God.

Now how might we do that? Where do we see examples of truth, honor, justice, purity, loveliness, graciousness, excellence, things worthy of praise? Well, we see those things in the Gospel—in the life of Christ that Paul has just said in Philippians 2 that the Christians need to model themselves on. So another way to

practice freedom from anxiety is to meditate on the life of Jesus, to meditate on the virtues of Christ, to immerse ourselves in the true and the good and the beautiful that's given in Scripture...that's given in the Word of God.

And Paul here is exhibit A. He himself lives that. Notice what he says here:

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you.

So Paul isn't just teaching the imitation of Christ. He's also—rather audaciously, but nonetheless truthfully—teaching them the imitation of Paul, the imitation of Paul the saint, the imitation of Paul the apostle. Because he's practicing these virtues in his own life as an apostle. He's saying, “Look at me, imitate me, because in imitating me, you're going to imitate Christ...because I am imitating Christ in the way that I live.” Alright, and he says:

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you.

Alright, so in closing then, just a little line from the living tradition here. As we go through Paul's letters, I'm going to be constantly quoting John Chrysostom, the fourth century bishop of Constantinople and the first great commentator on the letters of Paul and since he wrote commentaries on all of Paul's letters.

He was the greatest preacher in the history of Christianity. And in his homily on Philippians, on this passage from Philippians, listen to what he says about the secret of peace and freedom from anxiety. Chrysostom writes:

Behold another consolation, *a medicine which heals grief, and distress, and all that is painful*. And what is this? *Prayer, thanksgiving in all things*. And so He wills that our prayers should not simply be requests, but thanksgivings too for what we have. For how should he ask for future things, who is not thankful for the past?... *Wherefore we ought to give thanks for all things, even for those which seem to be grievous, for this is the part of the truly thankful man...* “And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall

guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.” What does this mean? “The peace of God” which He has wrought toward men, surpasses all understanding. For who could have expected, who could have hoped, that such good things would have come? They exceed all man’s understanding, not his speech alone.²

That’s from Chrysostom’s *Homilies on Philippians*, number 14. Though the part that really leaps out at me at that are first, Chrysostom says what I said (although I got it from him) is that prayer and thanksgiving together...so gratitude. That’s the secret to—that’s the medicine—for healing grief. But he goes even further than Paul in the sense that he says we have to give thanks not just for the good things. But when we learn to give thanks for everything, even for those which seem to be grievous, if we can thank God for the sufferings in our life, if we can thank God for the trials in our life, then we’ll find the part of the truly thankful man. In other words, then we’ll find the real peace that passes understanding—that supernatural peace that comes only from God.

Because that’s the way of the cross. That’s the way of Christ Himself, who was at peace even as He went to the cross. It’s the way of Paul, who is at peace even though he’s in prison and eventually on his way to the execution block and his own martyrdom. To give thanks not just for the good things in life but also for our trials and our sufferings is the way we can imitate Paul, we can imitate Christ, and the way to practice the secret of the peace that passes understanding.

² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Philippians* 14, in *NPNFI* 13.246-47